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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the discourse on nursery education in Great Britain. The provision of nursery education in the 1990s is in a vulnerable position, due to the changing nature of the family in society and to the lack of strong justification for its existence in the face of government intervention. A schism exists concerning the need for development and implementation of a comprehensive, coherent policy concerning preschool education. A major tension exists concerning the aims and purposes of provision for young children outside their homes. Program quality is a key concern. The criteria by which quality is measured are determined by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and applied cyclically to schools through a planned program of inspections. This paper is divided into the following sections: (1) "The Impact of Political Interest on Early Childhood Provision," detailing the history of political conflict over the issue of nursery education provision; (2) "Nursery Education: Beyond the '90s"; (3) "Conflicts within the Current Discourse," uncovering the fact that the key question concerning the pedagogy of nursery education and what is appropriate curriculum is still under debate; (4) "The Cultural Weaknesses of Early Childhood Practice in Britain"; (5) "The Early Years Curriculum"; (6) "OFSTED Inspections of Early Years Provision: Anatomy of an OFSTED Inspection"; (7) "A Framework for Reporting on the Educational Value of Early Provision" (8) "OFSTED Inspection Reports and the Early Years: A Preliminary Analysis"; (9) "Curricular Provision"; (10) "Quality of Teaching and Learning"; (11) "The Emergent Model"; and (12) "The Future," including a discussion of how the notion of "play" has been misunderstood. Contains 56 references. (BGC)

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Culture and Curriculum : tensions and dilemmas for early childhood specialists in England and Wales.

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the vulnerable position of nursery education in Britain of the 90s,given the changing nature of the family in society and more particularly in view of its weakly articulated justification in the face of Government intervention

The Impact of Political Interest on Early Childhood Provision.

Attempts to overview early childhood curriculum and practice from a specifically British perspective is fraught with difficulty. A major tension concerns the aims and purposes of provision for young children outside the home in differing institutional settings spanning both statutory and non-statutory attendance requirements. At the lower end of the conventional age range for 'early childhood',the politicisation of provision reasserted itself in the late 'sixties as a response to social deprivation and cognitive acceleration theses. In the 90s, expansion of preschool education has been placed on the agendas of both major political parties, although arguably for different reasons. The schism between enlightened opinion on the need for the development and implementation of a comprehensive and coherent policy on the

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day care and education of preschool children and effective political action has been as apparent over the last thirty years as it was in the earliest years of this century. Whitbread (1972) provides a fascinating account of the cyclical nature of intentions to expand nursery education followed by severely restricted expenditure. In 1924 for example, the first Labour Government withdrew two Circulars by the previous administration which limited expenditure on nursery schools, but had themselves to restrict the grant made to children under five by 1926. Over the next forty years commitment to and actual growth in nursery education was sporadic. As recently as 1960, Circular 8/60 issued to local authorities made it plain that ' no resources can at present be spared for the expansion of nursery education.' Once again preschool education lost out to more urgent priorities in the system. The value of nursery education to children's long term future had not been demonstrated in sufficiently persuasive terms to influence the expenditure plans in relation to the education budget. Allied to this were the vestiges of the view that young children were more properly cared for by their mothers until compulsory school age.

The 'sixties witnessed a quite remarkable transformation of the public discourse on preschool provision which extended debate and enquiry into forms of part and whole day care beyond that offered in nursery schools and classes. On the basis initially of the efforts of one pioneering woman the first play groups were officially recognised in 1961 and the now influential Preschool Play Groups Association came into being. These provided opportunities for young children, for whom no nursery place was available, to enjoy the benefits of creative play with children of a

similar age in a safe supervised environment. The subsequent development of the play group movement has been adequately documented elsewhere (see egvan der Eyken, 1973). Sufficient to note here that by the early '70s this voluntary form of provision had organised itself nationally and regionally, employed professional field officers, ran training courses for playgroup leaders (mainly mothers), and had attracted the passionate support of major educationists of the period. In the mid '70s the President of the Association, and tireless worker on its behalf, was Lady Plowden. A decade earlier she had steered the Committee of Enquiry which bears her name, to produce the remarkable report on primary education in England. In 1975, the Annual General Meeting of the PPA, determined to recommend playgroups as a viable alternative to nursery education and not simply a cheap stopgap until the long awaited expansion of nursery schooling became a reality. In many parts of the country then as now, playgroups whether run privately or through Social Service departments, voluntary agencies or charities, were the only form of provision available to families who sought part day provision for their two and three year olds. The national pattern in so far as it could be discerned has been described by Osborne and Milbank (1987) on the basis of the last major birth cohort to be researched on Britain. So important however was the voluntary contribution to preschool provision in the '70s that under the initiative again of Lady Plowden, the major stake holders came together to form the Voluntary Liaison Committee for the Under fives (VOLCUF), later to become the Voluntary Council. At that time VOLCUF was widely consulted by both the DES and the DHSS in respect of policy development for under-fives, and contributed substantially to the

drafting of circular 2/75 which promoted interdepartmental coordination, consultation and cooperation with regard to the planning of services for preschool children and their families.

The mid seventies in Britain may with some justice be regarded as the zenith of the debate on policy for young preschool children. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the accumulating research evidence on the wastage of human potential as a consequence of social disadvantage was brought to a sharp focus with the publication of the Plowden Report (1967) which followed closely the dissemination of the findings of the Coleman Report in the USA and the launch of the Headstart initiatives. The concern for compensatory strategies to offset the deleterious effects of disadvantaged home circumstances, sharpened the arguments in favour of nursery education which Plowden had advocated. Secondly, the research evidence from large longitudinal cohort studies such as the National Child Development Study, (see for example, Wedge and Prosser, 1973) seemed to indicate that complex human problems were unlikely to be resolved satisfactorily by any one service. Multidisciplinary, multi-agency and multi-service actions became the focus of attention.

Thirdly, whilst Plowden had focussed attention on the importance of community regeneration and parental involvement in their children's educational provision, other policy initiatives had focussed attention on the needs of families in relation to the needs of children. TheFiner Committee (1975) made recommendations in respect of One Parent Families. The Children Act (1975) revised the Law and reinforced the principle of the 'child's best interest'; research by Jackson (1974)

had revealed the extent of illegal child minding, and significant research into preschool education had been set in train following the White Paper presented to Parliament in 1972 by the then Secretary of State for Education, Mrs Margaret Thatcher.

The Seventies were a period of considerably heightened awareness of the needs of children and families and through the work of key figures such as Kellmer Pringle at the National Children's Bureau and Professor Jack Tizzard at the Thomas Coram Centre, notions of flexibly responsive patterns of care and education began to be articulated, responsive that is, to the needs of the emerging patterns of family organisation, the gradual breaking down of assumptions about the mother's principal role in child rearing, increasing female employment, growing numbers of one parent families, and the emerging discourse on gender equality. For many families, traditional nursery education, either full or part time would not suit their need for day care. It also became clear that the ad hoc provision of care arrangements within Local Authorities was unlikely to meet community needs. One of the fascinating developments fo the late Seventies was the systematic attempts by Local Authorities to create blueprints for flexible provision by undertaking local audits of need and identifying gaps in provision through the available demographic and planning data.

Fifteen years of monetarist economic policy applied to public sector institutions and the adoption of explanations for poverty and educational underachievement radically opposed to the liberal vision of the post war world, have however done little to promote a national system of flexible care and education tuned to the

changing needs of families with young children. The issues of the seventies had much to do with the provision of high quality, affordable, accessible facilities for young children, flexibly responsive to their needs and those of their families. Working mothers were and remain critical to the pattern of provision available in their neighbourhood. Perversely then as Moss (1989) notes, around 85% of all daycare remains in the private sector, access to which depends on ability to pay. Those who are arguably in greatest need of the facilities offered, ie single working parents, frequently find that either the cost is prohibitive or the nature of the place offered is inappropriate to the pattern of their employment. Patterns of employment in the UK whilst reflecting the experience of Europe and North America in terms of increasing participation of mothers of young children in the labour force (around 41% in the late '80s) is also characterised by a major shift to part-time working, at unsocial hours coupled with a persistent refusal of the UK Government to introduce a minimum basic wage. The public media has frequently exposed the plight of young unsupported mothers whose part-time wage barely covers the cost of the daycare they require to be available for work. Penn (1995), writing on the need for the development of integrated provision for the pre-fives notes that the persistent fragmentation of services "stems from conflicting values about what children under-five and their parents need and what role the state has in meeting those needs". She observes also that there are " major inequalities of access and of funding between care oriented and education oriented services" and that both at national and local level, delivery of services is further marked by few common aims and objectives and little consistency in service delivery. Wilkinson (1995) makes

similar points and reinforces the perception that provision for pre-fives in the UK is inadequate in three major respects ie, extent, variability, and organisation. Regional variation is marked as Osborne et al. (1984) also observed. The need for a thorough going conceptual analysis of the bases of preschool provision is argued by Wilkinson as an important precursor to finding solutions to the problem of improving the nature and scope of services to families with young children. He suggests that the principal strands of such an analysis would relate to :

the ideology of child care;

the psychology of child development and parenting;

the nature of education and care.

It is in relation to the latter of these that this paper seeks to make some observations, and even here will confine itself to the more overtly 'educational' aspects of pre-five developments in England and Wales. The expansion of nursery education, for many years supported by powerful advocates as the significant form of preschool provision, may not be the most socially sensitive response to family needs in the '90s, let alone into the next century. It remains nevertheless a major political commitment. As an important aspect of early childhood education in Britain, nursery education is underpinned by a formative discourse which embeds the thinking of recognised pioneeers in an essentially middle class value system, engages a narrative on psychological growth which is selectively constructivist, and reifies the action orientation of children's play. This paper will explore the relevance of this discourse to the changes that are occuring more widely within education and society.

Nursery Education : beyond the '90s

As Penn (op cit) has noted, attempts at the political level to justify the diverse pattern of provision for preschool children have tended to invoke the cherished commitment of the Conservative Government to 'choice and diversity' for parents. These are facets of a sustained rhetoric that has underpinned educational policy in respect of virtually every phase and sphere of education for more than a decade. In the light of recent promises by political parties both left and right of centre to expand 'nursery education' to the sorts of levels that were proclaimed in the 1972 White Paper 'A Framework for Expansion', a number of significant questions are posed for professionals working within the domain of early years education and more pointedly perhaps for those who like Moss (1995) and Wilkinson (1995) would argue for a vision of provision that took better account of the multi-service needs of families in the '90s and beyond.

British nursery education is recognisable through its control by qualified teachers, its funding through Education Departments of Local Authorities and its commitment to the holistic development of the individual child. Its availability is limited, even though it is frequently the preferred choice of parents. Currently in England around a quarter of 3 to 4 year olds experience this form of provision either part or full-time, with rather less than a half having such opportunity from 4 years onwards. A major trend of the last decade has been the growth of nursery classes attached to infant / primary schools, often at the expense of 'nursery schools' and a quite significant

increase in some areas of the rising-fives admitted to infant Reception classes. In some parts of the country virtually no nursery provision exists.

To some degree an apparent lack of enthusiasm to fund an expansion of nursery education by Government, may be related to the lack of hard evidence of long term effects which derives from an examination of British practice. Neither the 1958 British Perinatal Mortality Study, which became the National Child Development Study, nor the later Child Health and Education Survey (Osborne and Milbank, 1987) were able provide convincing data. In the first case the NCDS data base simply could not retrospectively answer the questions being posed in the '70s: The CHES study whilst appearing to have relevant data has not provided convincing evidence for reasons well covered in Clark's (1988) review. Whilst High Scope data on long term benefits have proved persuasive for some educators in Britain (see for example, Sylva, 1992), doubts inevitably exist over whether data collected over 25 years ago in a different cultural / social context have relevance to British society in the '90s. Nevertheless, of particular note, is that the political climate in Britain today is such, that advocates of nursery education are compelled to be aware of the tension that exists between traditional visions of nursery education as a stage complete unto itself, and the insistence of the 'hard right' for evidence of future benefit . The tension has to do as much with the nature of the evidence as with the nature of the benefit. The tension may be regarded as generated by competing ideologies with markedly different values. The sharpest contrast may be demonstrated by an opposition of the commodified view of education held by Government, and expressed through the 1988 Reform Act and the liberal vision of

the preschool world with its emphasis on holism and child centredness.

Faced with 'conviction' policies and a hard right 'common sense' approach to teaching and learning, practitioners have been forced into a reexamination of their beliefs and values concerning the form and character of provision for young children both preschool as well as in the first years of statutory attendance. This has led to tensions within the profession, revealing a broad interpretation of the aims and objectives of nursery education, and no consensus as to how quality provision may be defined. The work of Pascal (1990; 1994) at Worcester is proving helpful in clarifying concepts in as much as it has recognised the need for nursery education to respond pro-actively to pressures external to the system and to embrace the need for formal evaluation of teaching and learning in nursery classes.

The commitment by Government to raise standards of achievement in all schools has brought with it the requirement of schools to demonstrate efficiency of operation as well as effectiveness of teaching. Quality is a key word in British educational writing in the '90s. Systems for assessing it, monitoring it, assuring it, delivering it and reporting upon it have created new forms of institutional organisation, new posts, new committees, and above all new bureaucracies. The criteria by which quality is assessed are determined centrally through the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 1994) and applied cyclically to schools through a planned programme of inspections. The fact that provision in nursery schools and classes is caught in this inspection cycle has created consternation within the nursery world. The intention of OFSTED is to improve the educational value of what

schools offer children. Their reports are public documents with clear statements of actions required of the schools. Governing bodies are expected to assure the implementation of required change. The impact on schools will be cumulative as teachers think through issues raised through inspection and begin to address implications for policy and practice. The concern at nursery level is that the **definition of educational value** adopted by Inspectors may change curriculum content and pedagogy even though the requirements of National Curriculum do not apply. Downwash effects are feared as a consequence of the agenda for inspection and the manner in which outcomes are reported.

It is within the purpose of this paper to consider why such concerns should exist and whether any evidence has emerged to date to suggest if and how nursery education is being steered .

Conflicts within the Current Discourse

Initially it is worthwhile exploring aspects of the conventional wisdom of nursery education to identify tensions and dilemmas which may be rooted in its formative discourse. If there is a 'culture' of early childhood education in Britain it is sustained by the discourse of practitioners and professional educators, and pivots around a narrative on child-centredness, activity, autonomy, harmony and cooperation. Should the culture be at risk through current innovations in educational policy, then the discourse itself is being challenged.

Why would this arise?

One might suggest that a major reason concerns the likelihood that such cohesiveness that does exist within the culture of early childhood education

represents a different value position to that held by government. It is neither intrinsically better or worse; it is simply different. In consequence, the quality of provision may be judged by different sets of criteria both valid in their own terms as representing some measure of the goodness of fit between the ends in view and the effectiveness of the means through which they are sought.

A further reason may concern the extent to which early childhood practitioners share a vision of practice which is rooted in common assumptions about its purposes, its pedagogical forms and its curricular organisation. Of particular significance is the extent to which means-ends relationships find justification through reference to theories of education and of child development, the existence of competing paradigms of practice, and ultimately the extent to which practitioners are able to relate their own practices to some understanding of how children learn. The **key question** concerning what nursery education is for and what content is appropriate for under-fives to learn, continues to be debated.

Across the range of preschool and primary education, policy, provision and practice has become deeply influenced by a sustained political rhetoric which is in conflict with traditional educational practice. Emphasis on individual freedom and the celebration of individual success, has to be set against the requirement for cooperation, mutual understanding and tolerance in the pluralistic society that Britain has become. The National Curriculum requires that young children from 5 years be encouraged to learn through active cooperation and joint problem solving: learning is collaborative. Schools however compete one with the other for clients and resources. Academically successful schools attract parents which in

turn assures the resource base. Education is ceasing to be collaborative at Community level. Placing the broad span of early childhood education within the framework of a market economy, has shifted academic performance into the market place at the expense of a more holistic and traditional vision. A clear concern is that nursery schools and classes, in so far as they are influenced by the backwash of the National Curriculum, may contribute overtly to the political socialisation of children (see eg Kelly 1994). This could lead to an emphasis on competition rather then cooperation, individualism rather then collegiality, and self rather than other. Particularly disquieting is the possibility that the character of nursery education may change; overtly it may become a preparation for school and be judged by criteria which early childhood educators, if not parents, will find difficult to accommodate in relation to the formative discourse. The vocabulary of accountability, quality and value-added may appear within the grammar of each discourse, but invested with different meanings through different world views.
If the 'culture' of early childhood education becomes invaded by the political discourse on quality, does this imply weaknesses within that culture? Would such weaknesses relate to tensions and dilemmas within its formative discourse and how might they be characterised.

The Cultural Weaknesses of Early Childhood Practice in Britain.

One of the problems which T.S Eliot identifies in a famous essay is the way in which the word 'culture' is employed. Since it is one of the key words of this symposium it seems appropriate to make some observations about the complexity

of such a perspective on British early childhood education.To speak of a British culture is about as helpful as it is to speak of an American or Asian culture without then reflecting on the mix of values, attitudes, dispositions and historical referents which impact on current thinking and shape educational response. To describe the culture in terms of observable features such as its racial and ethnic composition, religious affiliations, social organisation, its architecture, cuisine, leisure pursuits is to provide a topography..a kind of travelogue for the outside. This not without value, but for present purposes an attempt will be made to tease out the features of a discourse on early childhood and the different narratives that meld together in a way that may be seen as characteristically British. I do not intend to convey that the narrative strands are uniquely British, since major formative influences clearly are not. It is more likely the case that the manner in which the supportive strands are woven together reflect historic purposes, values and imperatives. The chief concern for early childhood educators in Britain at the present time is whether the rope that has been woven can sustain the tensions created by the seismic shift in educational policy to better reflect the needs of a post-industrial society. The following are key strands in the discourse:

1. What is nursery education for? To what ends is it directed? Whose needs does it serve?
2. What kinds of knowledge are regarded as worthwhile for young children to acquire? Is there a content to the nursery curriculum and how is it justified?
3. What do we understand about the ways in which children acquire concepts

of the world they inhabit, build attitudes, values, dispositions, develop socially desirable skills and habits and become able to communicate fluently and effectively. What theories of motivation and attribution influence the assumptions made about children's learning needs and the character of learning environments.

4. What conception do we hold of the nature of the child, not only as a stage of human development but also in terms of a conception of humanity? Does our conception embrace the spiritual? Do we divorce the spiritual from the religious? Is our conception theistic or agnostic, is it pantheistic or monotheistic?

5. Is there a prevailing view of appropriate pedagogy. Do early childhood teachers understand its ramifications and are they able to justify their educational interventions? Does the pedagogy facilitate critical reflection on practice. What drives the actions of teachers?

6. What conceptions exist regarding "quality" in nursery education and early childhood education more broadly? Through what criteria is quality to be judged and what constitutes appropriate systems to assure the quality of educational interventions with young children?

In posing these questions it is necessary to recognise that they may be posed of any phase of education. The fact that increasingly in Britain there is a focus by professionals on issues connected with curriculum, with the effectiveness of children's learning, with the quality of provision and its long term benefits, can be

construed as ccnsequences of the wider political discourse. The fact that nursery education is non-statutory protects it perhaps from the degree of central control that primary schools have experienced since 1988, but still leaves it vulnerable to pressure form at least three directions. One of these concerns scrutiny by OFSTED since it is funded out of the public purse; another concerns the influence of fellow professionals in the Reception and infant departments who are only too well aware of the importance to children of a 'good start to schooling'; a third concerns pressure form parents to emphasise school readiness through the development of academic competencies. Part of the adjustment that Britain has to make to pluralsim and post-industrialism concerns the need to recognise that different groups hold views about the purposes of schooling which may not be in accord with the values and practices of some early childhood educators. The narrative on the play-based curriculum ignores for instance the evidence concerning the differential response of children from different social backgrounds to relatively unstructured learning environments.It presumes that the vision of nursery education held by current practitioners is a shared vision across socio-economic and cultural groups. It is however to the influence of OFSTED that this paper will susequently return since its impact is likely to be sharply focussed and immediate. The culture of early childhood education will change if the rope which binds it has weaknesses within its different strands. A key aspect of the discourse is inevitably the curriculum.

The Early Years Curriculum

Discussion of the curriculum by the majority of British writers do not readily disentangle the question of aims, the nature of childhood, or children's learning from consideration of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge. David (1990) makes the point succinctly when she observes that

> "..discrepant views about what constitutes a preschool curriculum and, reluctance on the part of some early years practitioners to delineate such a curriculum arise as a result of the strongly held and traditional belief that the individuality of each child is central to early years provision."

She goes on to note that this would mean that a child should be assisted in constructing her own curriculum. A version of this thesis had previously been developed by Bruce (1987), who whilst accepting that there is a content to the early years curriculum does nevertheless put the child at the centre of it. She argues that it is through the environment in which children work and play that the child and knowledge become linked. Nursery education is transformative and under appropriate teaching conditions the inner life of the child can emerge and the outer world can be internalised. Education is thus interactive and the meaning it makes for children depends on the quality of opportunities in the nursery environment for children to engage in a range of activities and with a variety of people. Worthwhileness of nursery activities for Bruce has to be seen in the context of their capacity to engage the child in self directed activity, to be extensible across conventional subject boundaries and across time. Curtis (1986) made a similar point in so far as she noted both the difficulty of ascribing to nursery education specific content related objectives, and the need to consider worthwhileness in

terms of activities which were 'infinitely extendible'. Both Curtis and Bruce would agree that 'good practice' starts from the child, provides an environment rich in opportunity for experience and is not limited by careful prior specification of learning outcomes. Explicitly Bruce argues for child initiated, self directed learning. The curriculum model is process oriented, and reflects a strong resistance amongst nursery educators to imposing adult conceptions of the external world directly upon children. The transmission model of teaching is rejected in favour of a constructivist position which is socially interactive. The model advanced by Bruce, attends to issues of empowerment and personal autonomy by valuing what the child brings and by emphasising self direction and choice. Teaching skills are manifest in the design of the learning environment, in capitalising on children's impulse to activity and in maximising the benefit of judicious interventions. Athey (1990) roots her own conception of early education in similar principles and through her research at the Froebel Institute demonstrates how concepts and schema both pattern and emerge from children's play in supportive settings. The influences which are recognisable in the principles and practice of early childhood professionals lean heavily towards Froebel, Steiner, Dewey, Isaacs, Winnicott, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner. The discourse of the child study movement has been absorbed with apparent ease into the mystical discourse of Froebel and Steiner and the psychoanalytic perspectives of Isaacs, Freud and Winnicott. It may fairly be said that nowhere else in the fabric of provision for children up to the age of 16 years, is the appeal to theory more evident, more influential and more determining of curriculum and pedagogy. This

nevertheless does not make for consensus, nor does it create justifications for curriculum and practice which are not open to serious challenge.

With not too much effort the differing perspectives can appear as if they fit a particular vision and thus become mutually reinforcing. This may serve a purpose but misrepresent a position: it is thus a potential source of attack on the discourse and thus weakens the impact of the culture.

There are three kinds of issues which in one sense or another represent potential sources of weakness. These relate to :

1. the perceived purposes of nursery education.;
2. the character of teaching and learning in the nursery class;
3. the content of the nursery curriculum.

As noted earlier, it is frequently difficult to disentangle these aspects from within contemporary writing, but in respect of each there are identifiable controversies which may be explored by posing them as questions:

1. What is nursery education for? To what ends is it directed.

The contemporay writings of nursery educators provide an answer to questions like these the by invoking what may be called the 'stage unto itself' thesis. This is exemplified by the Early Years Curriculum Group (1989) who stated a key principle to be:

> "Early Childhood is valid in itself, and is a part of life, not simply a preparation for work, or for the next stage of education."

Two years earlier Bruce (op cit) had teased out 10 common principles of the pioneers of early childhood and noted one of them as:

"Childhood is seen as valid in itself, as a part of life and not simply as a preparation for adulthood."

These appear similar: Bruce allows in her next sentence that it may hold an element of preparation in so far as she concedes that it is "not **just** preparation and and training for later" (1987, p10, my emphasis). In effect, education is of the present in so far as we take the child as our centre.

Another version of this stage based thesis has surfaced in a recent paper by Hurst (1994), who in defence of the character of nursery education proclaims

"under fives have particular needs which must be met in particular ways...they are not just less efficient infants but nursery -aged children who require nursery education"

The point of the paper was to erect a defence against the invasion of the culture of preschool through the political discourse on 'quality' and OFSTED inspection. It insists on the specialness of the preschool years as a stage in its own right carrying its own philosophy, values and pedagogical forms. Hurst's further attempt to harden the argument by claiming that pre-fives have qualitatively different modes of thought nevertheless actually weakens it. The idea nevertheless that preschool-age children can be considered as different from children a little older owes much to the particular interpretation of Paiget's work by early years educators in Britain. Hurst (op cit) is not on her own in invoking pre-operationalism as the determining characteristic of the thinking of 4 and 5 year olds and hence the need to consider them as somehow separate. Such a notion ignores a body of research which has required a reinterpretation of Piaget's work. Donaldson's (1978) work is

well known and has served to emphasise the significance of task features, context and situational factors for children's response. Light (1983) has also extensively discussed contextual variation in relation to egocentricity. His evidence suggested that some perspective taking ability is present very early in childhood, and certainly before the age of 7 when children succeed at the standard 'mountains test 'od Piaget and Inhelder. He observes that " all kinds of specific features of tasks have been found to affect substantially the degree of perspective taking evidenced by young children" (Light, 1983).

The idea of a formally separate and qualitatively different form of thinking between preschool and school age children makes relatively little sense. Such a view also has two other effects .

In the first place the operationalisation of a formally separate curriculum, driven by its own ideology and pedagogy has the potential for erecting a barrier to the demonstration of the future value of nursery education in academic terms. Later academic tests will, by definition, be invalid in so far as they are assessing aspects of intellectual growth that nursery education, because it is 'different', neither pre-specify, nor necessarily accept as relevant. This only becomes problematic when academic competence is placed in the market place and 'quality' issues place a heavy emphasis on the demonstration of growth in particular directions.

Secondly, the notion of a formally separate stage with its own curriculum ignores both the arguments and evidence in favour of continuity of experience and progression of ideas. These lie at the core of mainstream educational thinking in Britain and have found expression in all major curriculum documents produced by

HMI for decades.

The point here is to note where the discourse is weak. It is necessary to acknowledge that the appeal to unreconstructed Piagetetian theory as means of preserving a pre-operational 'play based' curriculum (Hurst op cit) is not helpful . The notion of formally different also flies in the face of common sense and is actually at variance with the vision of Froebel (1892) who is acknowledged by many as having influenced the discourse on child centredness in Britain. Tina Bruce's book "Early Childhood Education", referred to earlier, is recognisably Froebelian in leaning. Justification for the actional basis of the nursery curriculum owes much to the ideas of Froebel in respect of children's impulses. This is also very evident in the account Dewey (1965) provides of Froebel's educational theory in "The School and Society". Ironically, as Lee, Evans and Jackson (1994) point out, the claim to Froebelianism by many early childhood teachers holds little of Froebel's original vision. Stripped of its Christian purpose, secularised and sanitised for a post-modern muti-cultural and muti-faith society, Froebel's attempt to create coherent means-ends relations within his educational arrangements for young children becomes subverted. Within British preschool education Froebel becomes identified with child centredness, mothering, and unity with nature. The higher purposes which he sought, and on which he predicated his practice are hardly influential.

The principled basis of the nursery curriculum in Britain, whilst acknowledging its pioneers, presently owes more to a psychology of childhood, within which there is a reification of process and activity.

2. How is the learning environment to be constructed. What do nursey school children and their teachers do?

Within the public understanding of nursery education a significant feature of children's activity realtes to the discourse on **play**

The notion of play is celebrated amongst early childhood educators in Britain as the sine qua non of good practice. In the last half century the historical roots of the discourse have become strengthened through the impact of new knowledge gained principally from child development research. Piaget's immense work has inevitably had a notable impact. So also has the work of Bruner (1964) and Vygotsky (1965). Facets of theory are however prone to be selectively used if they fit a particular view. The observations previously made in relation to assumptions about pre-operational thought is an example. In relation to the nature and purpose of play a further example may be useful.

Dewey's impact on child centred education is variously described. He clearly found much in the writings of Froebel that were in accord with his own views. His emphasis on the child as an intensely active being " not purely a latent being " (1965, p36), but who is "already running over, spilling over,with activities of all kinds", resonates in the key principle of the Early Years Group noted above. There is nevertheless a peculiar divergence of commitment to the way in which such activity is to be employed in the furtherance of the child's education. Dewey (1965) poses the problem and provides a solution.

> "A question often asked is : If you begin with the child's ideas, impulses and interests, all so crude, so random and scattering, so little refined or

> spiritualised, how is he going to get the necessary discipline, culture, and information? If there were no way open to us except to excite and indulge these impulses of the child, the question might well be asked. We should either have to ignore and repress the activity or else to humour them. But, if we have organisation of equipment and of materials there is another path open to us. We can direct the child's activities giving them exercise along certain lines, and can thus lead up to the goal which logically stands at the end of the paths followed."

Elsewhere (1965, p129), and in relation to Froebel's educational principles, Dewey observes,"There is no ground for holding that the teacher should not suggest anything to the child until he has consciously expressed a want in that direction. A sympathetic teacher is quite likely to know more clearly than the child himself what his own instincts are and mean. But, the suggestion must fit in with the dominant mode of growth in the child."

From Dewey, we have what one might call the seeds of developmentally appropriate practise. We have also a clear sense of the relationship between ends and means, and a conception of the role of the teacher as provider, planner, organiser, and sympathetic director of children's learning. The teacher knows more than the child and has a vision of the goals to be achieved. Learning is active, centres on the child, values the child's incipient actional basis, but is not totally bound by it.

Dewey recognises the extent to which education in schools is value driven .

In British preschools, "play" is the overworked synonym for children's activities. As

a term, it is widely employed to describe the curriculum, heavily researched form many perspectives, (see for example, Smith, 1986; Mellou, 1994; Moyles, 1994), widely misunderstood by parents, and frequently extolled as defining the means and confining the ends of nursery education. From one perspective the value of play in its broad definition was well put by Dewey: its actional base has nevertheless achieved justification through appeal to Piaget in so far as his work is seen to support a social interactionist explanation of the construction of knowledge. By the same token, Bruner's original theoretical position on cognitive growth is also taken as support for the actional base of nursery position. For instance, Bruce (1987) invokes Bruners notion of "enactive mode" in her discussion of the importance of first hand experience to the early years curriculum.What is often insufficiently recognised is the need to be cautious about the significance of mere activity for cognitive development. Dewey seemed quite clear about the role of the teacher: Nursery educators are sometimes less than clear, not because the theory is vague (which it may be), but because an additional element is inserted into the equation. Most usually this element is the child's autonomy. The child's sense of self, and developing self-esteem, the movement from dependency to personally autonomous functioning and self-actualisation are all sponsored by valuing the child for herself and all she brings to the classroom. There is little to disagree with in this until the idea of adult intervention in children's activities is construed as potentially devaluing of these activities. Tamburrini (1983) discusses the issues and argues for heightened awareness on the part of teachers in preschool to the opportunities for extending the value of children's activities through appropriate

interventions. Tamburrini also explores another issue which is of significance in respect of play which she describes as "the possible conflation of action with mere activity". David (1990) refers to the same problem and locates it within a possible misinterpretation of Piaget. Many writers are less than clear on this point. Bruce (1987) for instance provides a succinct account of Piaget's ideas on assimilation and accommodation, but invokes Bruner's "enactive mode" as a means of justifying activity in preschool. Kelly (1994) also finds much to applaud in the Hadow Committee Report of 1931 when it referred to a curriculum which was to be understood " in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored".

There is a danger in all of this in so far as it relegates teaching expertise to 'craft knowledge ', and emphasises the necessary conditions for children's learning but not the sufficient. By emphasising the socially interactive character of children's learning, by stressing the importance of adults in providing scaffolding to children's learning, we implicitly accept the view that the adult role is to ensure that children engage with experience and learn from it. To assimilate experiences is not to learn from them. Learning involves some form of reflection on experience in order that it may contribute to an extension of cognitive schema. Cognitive competence is enlarged if existing structures are challenged by new experiences. This requires cognitive engagement so that idea derives from experience. It accords with Piaget's view that children understand their world through inner representations of it .It accords also with the view of Light (1983) that representational competence develops in accord with discrepancy resolution.

In relation to the play based curriculum there are implications in this for teaching if the sufficient conditions of learning are to be established. Teachers need to be active in assuring that children obtain educational value from their activities. They need to hold a claer sense of their own identity as leaders of children's learning. In turn this requires that strategies are employed both to monitor the activities that children have engaged in and to observe and record their responses to them. Until recently the discourse on play has paid insufficient attention to such critical teaching functions but its significance is being recognised through, for instance, the work of the PROCESS Project at Froebel (Stierer, 1993) and the work of Pascal at Worcester (1994). To the extent that the discourse fails to fully take account of its own claimed theoretical bases there will be in built weaknesses. Such weaknesses will be a function of preferred values rather a lack of theoretical insight, and as such renders the culture of early childhood open to invasion by alternative more powerful value systems.

3. What is worthwhile knowledge for young children? What should they learn at nursery school?

The nursery schools and classes in Britain are not subject to the requirements of the National Curriculum, although children in the 5 to 8 age range clearly are. In this sense the nursery curriculum may be seen as the last secret garden in the state funded education sector. Early years educators seem powerfully committed to the idea that it should remain so even though the political rhetoric of accountability is having an impact and the emerging issues are to do with developing high quality nursery programmes. This is evident in the significance that is attached to Pascal's

research and in the increasing number of Journal articles and books around this theme. Curricular intentions of teachers in the early years have of course been the subject of a number of researches and enquiries over a span of almost thirty years form the work of Parry and Archer (1975), Taylor, Exon and Holly (1972), through Athey (1990), Bruce (1987), the reports of HM Inspectors (1989) and the Rumbold Committee of Enquiry (1990). Whilst no formal curriculum exists there is good evidence to suggest that a de facto curriculum operates, with local variation, across most good nursery schools. There is an informed consensus on the areas of learning that are appropriate to preschool children and the kinds of environments that are best suited to their needs. As Bilton (1993) has shown, the notion of the nursery garden with the opportunities it holds for outdoor play, exploration, practising physical and gross motor skills and acquiring new ones, is built into the fabric of nursery schools and classes even in dense urban environments. The indoor and outdoor spaces are regarded as mutually supportive of the curricular goals, and appropriate architecture allows for free movement between them. The activities provided reflect in a broad sense, areas of learning that are recognisably relevant to 3 an 4 year olds. Children need to develop their abilities in the areas of language, communication and early number, to extend their knowledge of the environment, to grow physically, emotionally and socially, to express themselves creatively through a variety of media and aesthetically through music, art, drama, and movement. Traditional practice does not compartmentalise knowledge and considerable research has been done to illuminate the way for instance that block play can contribute powerfully to children's development and understanding in the

major domains. (Gura et al, 1992). Evidence is nevertheless accumulating of the ways in which Local Authorities are guiding the curriculum through the publication of quite elaborate curriculum statements (eg City of Westminster: A curriculum for the under Fives, 1994). Whilst greater explication of the curriculum is seen by some to be an aspect of accountability, it is seen also as a move to the greater specification of learning outcomes and a slide to an objectives based curriculum. Kelly (1994) argues strongly against the external specification of content, seeing in this an extension of the process of political socialisation of children which arguably is an outcome of the National Curriculum. A high quality curriculum, is for him, to be thought of in terms of a developmentally appropriate curriculum which is disembedded from the social context in which knowledge is constructed. The curriculum is to be driven by children's developmental dispositions:

" Such a concept of development, then, must be seen as natural rather than as socially constructed."

and the appropriate form of provision will be such as to support natural development towards

"autonomy, freedom of thought, and guiding the child from that necessary and inevitable period of dependency towards a genuine form of intellectual independence" Kelly (1994)

This is an extreme form of process driven curriculum modelling. It carries echoes of the question posed by Dewey,and noted above, in respect of children's unrestrained impulses. For Dewey, the teacher was the director and orchestrater, there were lines to follow and goals which stood logically at the end of them.For

Dewey there was a form of practice which was sensitive to children's state of being.For Kelly, the child's state of being sets the curriculum towards the goals of autonomy and intellectual independence. The two positions are very different and to the extent that the process view of curriculum is influential it weakens the early years discourse. It does so in the following ways.

Firstly, it invokes a conventional wisdom which emphasises the child's autonomy and freedom. Clearly, individual autonomy is a prerequisite for a democratic society; as an assumption it is at the core of the democratic process. As an assumption it is nevertheless justified by an appeal to its self evident validity. It represents a value position from which perspective it is open to the question as to whether it is universally valid and eternally relevant.

Secondly, to suggest that any curriculum is other than arbitrary, that a developmentally appropriate curriculum is somehow preferable to an externally derived model is to choose to ignore quite obvious issues connected with cultural relativities.Any attempt to describe development involves arbitrariness. The way we choose to study children is culturally and socially driven. Development cannot be discussed in a social or cultural vacuum, and it can only be described, assessed and charted through processes and practices available within the particular culture. Development is not value free: what become seen as desirable directions of development have validity within the culture. In consequence the pursuit of a developmentally appropriate curriculum does not avoid social engineering; the teacher will direct development in so far as she will tend to children's needs as she recognises them. The child becomes both acculturated and socialised. Unless one

declares that the teacher posses no worthwhile knowledge, a power relationship exists within the classroom. Autonomy and freedom are thus both illusions, apart from the obvious point that the social psychological literature on the growth of autonomy deals with stages in its evolution.

Thirdly to speak of genuine intellectual independence creates more problems than it solves. A child's vision of the world, her place within it and her power to affect it are all powerfully constructed through language, both vocal and gestural. Language encodes social and cultural experience, it is heavily value laden, driven by imagery and metaphor, and is at one and the same time both the outcome of experience and the means by which each child acquires knowledge and understanding of the world. Intellectual life is so fundamentally connected with language that 'genuine intellectual independence ' is a notion so elusive that the very act of tying it down renders it meaningless. In the 1960,s the illuminating work on the sociology of language produced by Bernstein (1971) helped us understand the contextual mechanisms which significantly shaped the language produced by children and how this impacted on teacher -child relations . Notably the extent to which judgments of children's intellectual competence were, and are, pinned to their linguistic accomplishments and literacy skills. Since the early '70s in Britain, educational curricular thinking,reaching deep into the heart of the early years, has emphasised all aspects of language and literacy...including oracy. The National Oracy Project (SCDC, 1987) and The National Writing Project (Vicary, 1987) were established to provide enabling frameworks for the development of professional practice. Developmentalist perspectives in the domain of literacy have become

influential in creating a focus on 'emergent' skills, encouraging teachers to value and to build upon children's existing representational competences whilst at the same time providing a language environment which is rich in experience. Language experience approaches to teaching and learning almost inevitably extol the virtues of 'real books' in preference to the graded schemes and exercises which characterised aspects of early years curriculum a decade or so ago. Here again however, one cannot escape political socialisation. Whilst current reading material for young children, as much as for other age groups, is produced to sustain the vision of equality of opportunity and social justice by attending to issues of gender,race and disability, there is no escaping the political message it conveys. It is intentional, up-front and overt. It is politically correct in the 90's in the same way as the now discredited messages of the early decades of the century concerning national power and Empire were in their day also 'correct'.The development of language in the early years, promoted in the variety of contexts which children inhabit, contributes to their representational competence by shaping the cognitive grids through which meaning is made.Unless then one is clear about what intellectual independence is, it is in danger of becoming at best a slogan and at worst, a contradiction of terms.

If then, as Kelly suggests, the developmentally appropriate curriculum is advocated to avoid the instrumentality of the later curriculum, to off-set political socialisation, the arguments are conceptually weak and as such contribute little to the strengthening of the early childhood discourse. The arguments are neither psychologically sound, nor in the final analysis are they necessary. They serve

only to divert attention away from the potential strength of the formative discourses of early childhood education by substituting value positions for theory, and by celebrating 'process' effectively invert means -ends relations. The argument is reminiscent of past battles fought over control of the primary curriculum. It is more an argument over the autonomy of the teacher as 'expert' than it is over the autonomy of the child.

What then are the kinds of weaknesses in the formative discourses that could render early childhood education vulnerable to external influence? From what perspectives is the culture open to invasion?. These may suggested tentatively as they have surfaced in the earlier discussion. the list is also indicative rather than inclusive since important aspects of the 'culture' have not been dealt with.

Firstly then, the 'stage unto itself' thesis is a weak position. It cannot be justified by reference to psychological theory in any strong sense. Every phase of human development is in some sense a preparation for the future. Ironically the significance of quality nursery provision for future healthy development is recognised even by those who hold to the thesis. It is a statement of a value position which disconnects nursery education from key educational principles such as continuity and progression.

Secondly, the particular interpretation of child centredness which values child initiated activity and emphasises autonomy and freedom, carries the potential for confusion in respect of the teacher's role in structuring, organising, planning,

implementing, and evaluating the curriculum. In what terms is educational value to be judged; are the criteria visible and what systems exist for recording and reporting children's progress? What degree of specificity does this involve? Thirdly, the nursery curriculum in action is built around activity, extensively described as play based. Whilst this is a potential strength of provision it is also a weakness of the discourse. The theory of play is complex and much is predicated upon it. The danger nevertheless is that growth may be expected to emerge from activity, rather than from action in the psychological sense. Activity may be a necessary condition for development but it is not sufficient. Adult interventions are necessary to bring about the sufficient conditions for concept learning. This impacts on the role of the teacher: a role that is often conflicted by the perceived need to value the child's activity and the need to ensure that benefit is derived.
Fourthly, the weak specification of content in terms of expectable outcomes of nursery provision has tended to de-emphasise the importance of systematic recording and monitoring of children's responses to particular experiences and their take up of the activities that are available. Within the culture, the question as to whether this is important to know will be influenced by the teachers conception of the purposes which her curriculum serve. Whilst the range of activities available may be potentially rich, a child initiated and self directed learning regime may limit experience. The issue of balance between teacher initiated and child initiated activity is an area of potential conflict.

Despite these weaknesses in the discourse, nursery practice has in the past been

generally well reviewed by HMI.

> "Taking all factors into account, children under five in nursery schools and classes generally receive a broader better balanced education than those in primary classes"
>
> (DES 1989)

However, the culture of inspection has also changed with the establishment of OFSTED. The new inspection teams are unlike HMI in key respects. Their role is effectively to undertake an efficiency and effectiveness audit using carefully scripted indicators. HMI who inspected early years provision were generally sympathetic to the culture having been highly successful practitioners themselves. The discourse of nursery provision was accessible to them: they had in many instances shaped the discourse and set the agenda of good practice. Current OFSTED teams have to work in a climate that declares a conception of good teachers to be those who:

> " employ different teaching methods to achieve different objectives: a doctrinaire commitment to any one approach will necessarily render lessons less effective than they might otherwise have been"
>
> (OFSTED 1995)

Another barb in the arrow comes from one of the two major Curriculum Councils when setting the principles for the education of three to five year olds:

> "Learning through structured and spontaneous play is the springboard into the curriculum"
>
> (Curriculum Council for Wales 1991)

Here we see a clear invasion of the 'stage unto itself' thesis and a shift of the discourse into structured learning environments. With a hard edged contracted-out inspection service receiving such messages from key National bodies, the opportunity exists for conflict with the early years tradition. Practise may be 'misunderstood' because the discourse of nursery education is not accessible to those outside the culture.

Is this likely?

I have argued that early childhood education in its nursery aspect may considered to have some of the characteristics of a 'culture' Its status as such is recognisable in so far as its adherents and proponents set values on particular activities,induct new members to the vocabulary and grammar of the group,regulate the behaviour of members, and have a high regard for group cohesion. The language of the group may be more or less accessible to outsiders: the power of the group resides in the knowledge they are presumed to hold. As Foucault observed, the assumption of specialised knowledge is frequently predicated upon the existence and use of a specialised technical language, which in turn legitimates particular actions or interventions by members.Barriers to outside interference are built directly by appeal to the specialist knowledge which is encoded by the technical language.We thus engage in tautological language games where a challenge to the status quo has to be mounted using the language of the group for it to be recognised as legitimate.In so far as the language of the group is employed, a challenge is unlikely since the world view of the group has already been encompassed by the user of the language. A challenge to the status quo in terms of basic attitudes,

values and purposes is unlikely to come through a palace revolution. It is more likely to come from outside, from groups which hold greater legitimate power and who create an agenda for change which is irresistible from a rational standpoint. These conditions are satisfied by OFSTED teams. They are required under Statute. They hold legitimate authority. Their agenda is concerned with delivering high quality education to children and the raising of educational standards nationally. It is in this regard that weaknesses in the formative discourse of the early childhood education will render it susceptible to attack and bring about a cultural shift.

What this paper will now examine is the extent to which the evidence of inspections to date are indicative of an attempt to steer practice and if so in what respects. The evidence is based upon the first unsupervised access to the OFSTED electronic data base of inspection reports to be granted in the UK .As such it is unique evidence at the present time.

OFSTED Inspections of Early years provision.

Anatomy of an OFSTED Inspection.

Inspection teams are lead by an experienced trained Registered Inspector. Other members of the team have undergone a short period of intensive training but are not necessarily experienced in the process of school inspection. As originally conceived so-called lay inspectors could be drawn from outside the ranks of the education service. The size of the Inspection team will vary with the size of the

school as will the period of the inspection itself. For a primary school of average size, ie 250 to 300 pupils, a team of 6 inspectors will spend up to 5 days within the school. Because the inspection service is contracted - out, teams of inspectors under the Registered inspector may bid through OFSTED to undertake inspections in any part of England and Wales. As a process it is quite unlike anything that schools have hitherto been exposed to . Such inspectors are not the critical friends or conveyors of good practice which their HMI predecessors had been for generations . Part of their brief is to identify areas for improvement within the school.

The actual inspection is guided by a careful script prepared by OFSTED itself and referred to as the Framework Document. The existing Framework is already under revision.

Over four or five days in a First school for instance,the team will collectively observe upwards of a 100 lessons of up to a half hour duration organised around subjects of the National Curriculum.On each of these occasions,the teacher's own lesson plans, provision of learning experiences, style of classroom organisation, management of the learning environment, control of behaviour, will be graded and related both to the quality of learning evidenced by the children and the connexion of the planned learning with key policy documents within the school.

Generally, systems in place or under development for assessing children's learning, monitoring their development through the levels of the NC, and mechanisms on reporting children's progress to parents will be closely scrutinised.

The educational value of the activities witnessed in classrooms and experienced

by children will be related to expectations laid down through the National Assessment and against age related norms of achievement.

Every system within the school, from strategic financial planning to mechanisms for reviewing the school development plan will be carefully scrutinised in terms of effectiveness and efficiency and against statutory requirements.

The evidence required by inspectors to inform their judgments is guided by the OFSTED Handbook.The results of the inspection under existing arrangements are reported verbally to the Senior Team, to the whole staff and to Governors separately. Subsequently a written report is made public .Media interest in these reports at local and sometimes Regional level is high. Where a school is judged to be highly successful or to be 'failing' it is not unusual for such reports to be picked up by Regional TV and Radio. Schools are expected to issue a Press Statement within a short time of the written report being made public.

This procedure does of course create interesting tensions within primary schools and more particularly within the early years of education. A standard terminology has emerged from OFSTED whereby "the early years ' is taken to mean 'under-fives', 'pre-Key Stage 1', 'nursery', or 'children below statutory school age'. Within the early years, as indeed in much of primary education itself, curriculum coverage is achieved through a diverse pattern of organisational strategies and delivered through a range of teaching styles to classes which are organised for learning in a variety of ways. In consequence, the inspection script creates particular tensions in an infant or primary school which employs a topic- led approach to the curriculum since they are required to provide clearly timetabled opportunities for

inspectors to witness the subject elements of the NC being studied. Again, within Reception classes where there are children between 4 and 5 years of age to whom the NC does not apply, inspectors are deemed to have acted as if they have observed two separate lessons although they will have been in one classroom where all children are likely to be working at their own pace in a variety of groupings. They nevertheless report separately on reception and early years provision within the same classroom.Until recently, December 1994, no specific guidance existed for the inspection of early years provision outside the general framework that was available for primary education.

Given that a document has now come into existence that is designed to inform the inspection process of early years provision it is worth describing briefly the proposed architecture of the scrutiny and posit some questions related to underpinning assumptions. All of this is important in so far as it forms the inspection agenda and delineates the kind of evidence which will shape professional judgments. Whilst individual inspectors have some flexibility in compiling the final prose, the format of reporting is heavily proscribed.

In the final section of this paper it is to the prose I shall turn in an effort to tease out the professional interpretations that have been placed upon the early years teaching that has been seen, and the degree to which a model of practice emerges which is deemed to be educationally sound.

A Framework for Reporting on the educational value of early years provision.

The framework covers six main areas but the intention here is to deal only with

those sections which reveal something of the content of the curriculum, how standards of achievement are interpreted and how the quality of learning and teaching is judged.

1.Content of Lesson

Account is taken of the range of activities available to children,referred to six broad areas of learning. Theses are noted as : linguistic and literary, mathematical, scientific and technological, human and social, physical, aesthetic and creative.Particular attention is required in respect of interactions between individual children and their peers as well as with adults who are present.

2. Standards of Achievement.

Because the National Curriculum is not applicable to under fives, there are no norms of achievement against which the observations of inspectors are to be set. However, there is a requirement that

judgments are made on standards of achievement in relation to pupils' capabilities based on evidence of what pupils know, understand and can do in the six broad areas of learning. Judgments are also made in respect of children's social competence,oracy skills and physical dexterity. Standards observed in particular observational setting are rated on a five point scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (poor) .These are aggregated over all observations in all settings. What is beginning to be controversial about the Consultative paper is that whilst there are clear statements concerning the non applicability of national norms to children's achievement, the guidance notes provides reference lists of key statements about what children 3 to

4 years old and 4 to 5 years old should be able to do. For instance, between 3 and 4, most children should be able to :

join in work in small groups as well as working on their own.

use language to communicate their wishes feelings and understandings.

listen for periods of time as a member of a larger group.

use equipment and resources including IT constructively and imaginatively.

be aware of and able to use their bodies in different ways.

be able to follow simple directions.

For children 4 to 5 years, most should :

demonstrate increasing independence,

have an understanding of the purpose of books and be able to enjoy and use books.

be able to reason and apply their knowledge in solving everyday problems.

show an awareness of pattern and number by discriminating and sorting.

be able to co-operate with other children,leading to instances collaborative play as well as working independently.

show evidence of emergent reading and writing skills.

The importance of the six areas of learning to judgments on children's

achievements is emphasised through exemplifications which are equally assertive. Achievement in language and literacy is to be based upon the extent to which pupils can;

communicate with others in speech;

listen attentively to stories, songs and poems and learn some of them by heart.

enjoy and share books and recognise that print is used to carry meaning.

draw and begin to write.

In the mathematical area of learning, emphasis is again placed on the teaching as enabling children to sort, match and count objects, develop mathematical language; develop mathematical language; extend their spatial awareness and develop ideas of sequence pattern and order.

All four remaining areas of learning are guided by similarly explicit notions on what is to be expected within early years provision where standards of achievement by children are sound or better. Of particular note in respect of the tensions previously noted within the early years 'culture' is the infrequent use of the word 'play' as either a characteristic of provision or as a vehicle for delivering an appropriate curriculum. In fact what seems to emerge from the guidance to Inspectors is something that appears very different to the early years curriculum espoused by Kelly (1994) and Hurst (1994). There is the occasional reference to play but it is not reified, and where the term is employed there is a presumption that it is appropriate to the intentions of the teacher, being within her construction of the learning environment and pedagogically instrumental to particular ends . This is clarified in two important elements of inspection judgment referred to separately as

Quality of Learning and Quality of Teaching

3.Quality of Learning.

Statements under this heading are particularly revealing of a paradigm of practice which is embedded within the inspection process. Firstly there is an expected appeal to the motivational aspects of learning, eg

> are children interested in what they are doing ..and making progress.Is their learning enjoyable,rewarding and satisfying.

Secondly there is acknowledgement of the desire for activity through questions related to the provision of ..

> experiences within which they can explore, experiment and take risks.....and ..... practical activity, enquiry and purposeful play.....and .....opportunities for spontaneous interaction and for learning from each other.

The text of the guidance carries a particular vision of what this might mean, a vision which becomes very much more evident in the section which relates to judgments made on the quality of teaching. For instance,if I restate the above questions in the way they actually appear in the guidance text, they read:

> are they given first hand experiences...
>
> are they given opportunities for spontaneous interaction..
>
> can they practice, consolidate and extend their previous learning.

Taken in conjunction with a clear statement that children's 'first experiences of school need to be positive ones in order to develop the attitudes and habits for learning that will provide a foundation for their future education', a particular construction begins to emerge regarding purposes of public early years education which contrasts with the 'stage unto itself', 'developmentally appropriate views' referred to earlier. Within this construction the role of the teacher becomes

explicated through reference to the guidance on judging quality of teaching.

4.Quality of Teaching

One of the issues that was raised in an an earlier section of this paper concerned the mistake that some early years teachers make in conflating activity with action in the Piagetian sense. The need as I expressed it was for the adults present to engage in appropriate dialogue with children so as to engage them in reflection on their experiences. The question as to if, and under what circumstances adults should intervene in the activities of the young in their care has been as source of perplexing debate amongst professionals, often construed as a direct affront to the autonomy of the child and and a devaluing of the child's activity.(see for example Tamburrini, 1983).

The OFSTED guidance does not involve itself in this debate .It says quite explicitly, that when applying the criteria to judge the quality of teaching inspectors should keep in mind:

> how well activities are planned and structured.
>
> how appropriately and successfully teachers use their knowledge and skills to teach, direct, intervene, and harness children's learning.

Effective teaching is seen to relate to teacher's knowledge of how children learn, to staff planning and working as a team,to the provision of clearly planned, purposeful activities (in the sense of the areas of learning) and to the evidence of a balance of adult initiated to self-chosen activities. The Framework does not suggest what this balance might be, leaving it to the experience and professional wisdom of the Inspectorate.What is clear however, is that staff interventions are expected to show evidence of extending children's play or response, that it provides direction, and enables children to develop and consolidate learning and benefit from their mistakes.More-over children are helped through talk and relevant questioning to evaluate what they have done.This notion of self evaluation is part of general

concern to engage children in the assessment process throughout primary and secondary education.

The foregoing concerns for content of curriculum and quality of teaching and learning are of course nested in the assumption that children's benefit from experience is related to their opportunities to experience. Not surprisingly therefore the OFSTED paper draws attention to the desirable features of an appropriately resourced nursery school or class, noting that both indoor and outdoor provision should be linked together so as to reflect the total curriculum offered. In drawing attention to the flow of children between these two resourced spaces it reflects the historical ties of nursery education to the nursery garden, ties which have been used as basis for judging the architecture of modern purpose built nurseries.The OFSTED document simply notes however that the outdoor space should be secure,and offer a variety of surfaces textures and levels.It notes also that schools are exempt from the guidance within the Children's Act (1989) on standards for space.."although this might provide a useful measure".

Overall,if one asks whether the Consultative document encodes a vision of early years provision for its inspectorate which is likely to be problematic, the answer has to be sought within the existing discourse on early years provision.

Explicitly, the early years curriculum is expected to form the foundations of learning at statutory school age. Few, within the culture of early childhood education would find this problematic. It depends upon what one means by 'foundations'. OFSTED however take the matter further " many of the activities planned will lead into the Programmes of Study" . Explicitly, the early years curriculum is connected to the National Curriculum. Inspectors will need to form a judgment about the extent to which it "provides the appropriate basis for later education" and the extent to which it " links to the curriculum provided at the beginning of Key Stage 1". It is through such notions that the early years curriculum that has *educational* value will become

operationalised.

The literature of early childhood education is riven with concerns for process,for activity, for play,for the roles of the nursery 'teacher'. There is a sensitivity to the use of the vocabulary of structural pedagogy, ie planning and structuring activities, teaching, directing, reinforcing, harnessing, extending, and consolidating children's learning. OFSTED shows no such sensitivity in employing this vocabulary. There is after all an official DFE view that renders doctrinaire approaches to teaching and an excessive dependence on a single pedagogical style as likely to be unhelpful. Not surprisingly perhaps,if there is a pedagogical model to be identified within the Consultative Framework paper, it is essentially pragmatic and underpinned by the notion that teaching style will relate to the learning outcomes desired. It is perhaps here that the 'culture' of the early years will face its greatest challenge. How will inspectors who are unimbued with the culture, unused to the doctrine of play, interpret what they see? How will they judge its educational value? What opportunities for improvement will be identified and will these shift a focus from holistic development to academic competence.? Evidence is beginning to emerge from the Inspections that have been completed in the past 9 months. Some tentative answers to these questions may perhaps be proposed. It is to this evidence that I now turn. These are the written reports of Inspections teams as they have been published and logged onto the central electronic data base of OFSTED. Constraints of space allow only a brief glimpse into this fascinating and potentially influential database and this has been organised around a number of key questions. The evidence is drawn from an analysis of the prose from a 1 in 10 opportunity sample of reports on schools in which early years work has been judged. Because of the particular stage of inspection cycles, a stratification of the sample to reflect the national balance of provision by infant / first / primary school of attachment, by school / class / unit / reception class, or by urban / rural location has not been attempted. There is

national coverage across England and Wales in the data presented, but its essence as an opportunity sample needs to kept in mind.

OFSTED Inspection Reports and the Early Years: A preliminary Analysis.

Two features of reports on inspections become readily apparent. One relates to the way in which gradings of observed practice obtained by different inspectors on the team,on different occasions during the week are subsequently aggregated to produce the final result to which descriptors are attached. Regression to the mean of the scale is inevitable,with the result that reports of different schools can appear bland. A second feature concerns a notable adherence to a 'training' script marked in many instances with recognisable vocabulary,phraseology and paragraph structure.This provides continuity of style whilst occasionally rendering the meaning opaque. The prose seldom provides powerful images of nursery education 'in action.' The key issues however relate to whether or not a picture of effective education emerges, how it is characterised and whether any sense can be gained of the perceived value of current early years practice on a national canvas. A number of general points can be made on which different inspection teams reached similar views.

Firstly, early years provision is marked by a welcoming atmosphere in which children are securely catered for, in accommodation considered to be adequately furnished and equipped and with access to an outdoor space.Secondly,no report considers the available range of activities to be inappropriate or lacking in the potential to stimulate and encourage children's imagination, to promote learning and to contribute to social and physical skills. Thirdly,in all instances, parents were welcomed into the nursery and relations with them were sound.

Consistency of reporting is also found in the degree to which it is noted that within the class or unit children appear able and eager to relate to adults, move around

with confidence indoors and out and are able to work in small groups and on their own. There is strong support from across the range of inspection reports for a vision of early years practice which enables children to have opportunities for talk in a variety of contexts and to benefit form orderly routines which emphasise building of confidence and self esteem. The reports are consistent in their avoidance of any evaluative statements regarding the significance of 'play' as a means of achieving curricular objectives, preferring instead to speak of activities and their observed value to children through their accessibility, structure, and follow -up, and the balance observed between adult initiated and self chosen activities. In more than half of the reports on early years provision, 'play' is simply not mentioned. In others it is used in a matter of fact way to note that ' the under-fives work and play together cooperatively in most activities', and through virtual inference in other contexts where ' pupils have access to aesthetic and creative activities and represent their findings through clay, painting and modelling'. It is of course the range, nature, purpose, and diversity of the 'activities', the ways in which they are planned, structured, initiated, and evaluated within the framework of 6 areas of learning which dominate the perspectives of the inspectors and influence judgments on value for money. It is quite clearly through these emphases that the early years curriculum is being shaped. It is equally clear that considerable variation exists along significant di.mensions of the notion of educational value.

Curricular provision

Earlier in this paper the I raised the spectre of the continuing debate on the purposes of the early years curriculum and the tensions that exist in attempts to specify content. The following extracts reveal the way in which this debate is being resolved.

"The areas of learning, including linguistic and literary, mathematical, scientific and

technological, human and social, physical and aesthetic and creative, are addressed in the nursery. The curriculum is well balanced"

" The nursery provides a good introduction to school life in terms of relationships and social skills, but the activities it provides have limited educational value and the children's knowledge is not extended sufficiently".

"The planned curriculum ..pays insufficient attention to the objectives for learning and the areas of experience which the children should encounter."

In all the reports, the specification of the six areas of learning is made the yardstick for judging curriculum balance and often these are further illuminated in ways which clearly reflect the impact of the guidance contained in the Consultative paper.

"Early mathematical understanding is competently developed. The children are encouraged to sort and classify and talk about numbers."
Again,
"Attention is given to social, moral and spiritual development and provision is made for imaginative as wel as investigative play."
and again,
"Early literacy skills are encouraged through a good range of reading activities and through the development of early writing"
The purposes of early years provision is cast within the realm of preparation for school, and is evidently discordant with those within the nursery tradition who have promoted this phase of provision as complete unto itself.The 'springboard' view emerges with varying degrees of strength from the individual reports but even where explicit statements are absent,the general tone of evaluative judgment

invokes an image of future subject driven competency.

"More detailed planning could help raise standards in art, technology, music and science,to provide a sound basis for education at Key Stage 1."

" In mathematics,children's ability would be enhanced by more experiences related to the practical maths in year1."

"More opportunity to respond actively to print would build on the experiences pupils bring from home and link with the reading programme in Key Stage 1."

" Their progress is carefully monitored and assessed and with the nursery curriculum they experience, is good preparation for Key Stage 1."

The point is often reiterated also in respect of record keeping, profiling and planning, which from the evidence is seen as having a positive impact on the way in which the teaching programme is matched to individual needs.Inspectors note variability in the extent to which schools have developed policy and practice in this regard and there are quite frequent calls for improvement in this area:

"Systems for observing, assessing and recording achievement are not well established.....and there are no regular procedures to record take up of activities or to evaluate learning on a regular basis."

Quality of Teaching and Learning.

Within the nursery tradition, as was discussed earlier, children's activity is scaffolded through the provision of a wide range of resources designed to stimulate practical activity, enquiry, observational and communicative skills, engage them in physical tasks to help develop gross motor skills and bodily awareness, encourage initiative and imagination, and extend their aesthetic experience through story, music and art. Personal relations in terms of cooperation with other children and adults is highly valued, as is the development of respect for self and others. The different reports make clear that overall, the provision of such activities

is not a source of concern. They are wide ranging and appropriate to children of preschool age. However, it is apparent that the quality of learning observed is variable, being related to a variety of factors but notably to the way in which the teachers view their role in respect of planning, intervention, reflection and review. The embedded message of the reports confirms outcomes from previous research into primary education (Bennett, 1984) that busy, happy children are not necessarily achieving as much as they could . Good standards of achievement relate to the clarity with which teachers plan and structure activities, monitor children's progress through them, engage children in discussion and challenge their understanding. In Piagetian terms, teachers in successful nursery classes transform activity into action. The following extracts illuminate this:

"Standards of achievement observed varied from good to unsatisfactory. Much of the work is routine and lacks in challenge"

"When adults spent time with individuals or groups, and challenged them, the quality of learning was good".

" Work directed to the whole class, eg story, TV time, outdoor play and PE was generally inadequate."

"The quality of learning observed was good. Staff follow through children's ideas and extend them".

"Children's learning would benefit from having their access to books supported by adults"

" The work was of a good standard, well planned, carefully prepared activities matched to pupils interests and abilities'.

"The nursery provided an appropriate range of activities,structured to develop skills and understanding."

"More detailed planning would help raise standards".

The Emergent Model

The model of effective teaching to emerge, which is related to effective learning, may be summarised as follows:

Assess the skills and abilities that children can evidence on entry to the nursery.

Provide a system for monitoring children's progress in the six areas of learning specified in the framework document,having regard to the development of their personal -social skills, cooperative abilities, motivation and enjoyment.

Ensure that the activities provided, inside and outside, are age appropriate, rich in opportunity to experience, support the curriculum, are well planned and have regard to the objectives for learning.

Additionally,systems should be in place to monitor individual children's take up of these activities and the learning outcomes observed, by reference eg, to the curriculum at the beginning of Key Stage 1.

Ensure that the activities are challenging, that experiences are reflected upon and learned from, and that children are encouraged to be active in evaluating the benefit derived.

Adults within the classroom, including parents, can scaffold children's learning by supporting access to books, stimulating their speaking and listening skills, ensuring that the rich cultural diversity of the neighbourhood is reflected in the school and class, and through providing a resource to children whose first language is not English.

Importantly from the view point of teacher behaviours, a repertoire of teaching strategies is likely to be more effective and appropriate than rigid adherence to a single style however persuasive the embedding culture might be.

The future?

Earlier in this paper the question was raised as to whether practice within nursery education could be led through a discourse on quality as it emerged from OFSTED inspections. It has been suggested that where there were perceived weaknesess within the culture of early childhood education it was open to invasion through an alternative discourse charaterized by different values, different ends and different conceptions of the role of the teacher. A key issue relates to the focus on "education value" and the extent to which the traditional nursery culture may be interpreting this in ways that may appear to be significantly different from the position which inspectorial teams can be expected to adopt. The previous section of this paper has highlighted the emergent model of practice which OFSTED reports to date seem to endorse. There is however an interesting question to be posed. Whilst the early part of this paper explored the points of weakness in the conventional discourse on nursery education, as it emerges from published texts and articles, one does need to ask whether or not the practitioner who daily operates in the nursery classroom is constrained by the conventional wisdom. There are indications, manifest within the reports on practice, that much that has been observed, is judged as sound. There are a number of possible reasons for this. One of them relates to the fact that nursery practice has already begun to respond to the change in culture and that on the "shop floor", the persuasive traditional rhetoric is being interpreted in ways that are more in keeping with the character of the times. Whether this would have happened in the absence of the debate on quality is itself an interesting question. From one perspective it could be

argued that the traditional culture has already been invaded, and as Pascal's work shows, has begun to respond. A second reason may relate to the possibility that the practitioner view of the nature and purposes of nursery education is not well represented in the public discourse. What seems to be clear however, is that in State funded nursery education provision a view of its purposes increasingly reflects preparation for formal schooling - whether or not we agree with Ball (1995) that this may be (cynically?) regarded as Key Stage 0 of the National Curriculum is another matter. The "springboard" view of nursery education is gaining momentum partly because the "stage unto itself" view is increasingly untenable in a commodified culture and partly because such a view represents a dislocation of the current discourse from its historic philosophical roots. It can not be supported either from a psychological perspective, as neo-Piagetian theory makes clear. What the OFSTED reports also make clear is the extent to which "educational value" is to be judged in terms of the potential of available activities to not only enrich experience, but to challenge childrens" understanding. If this constitutes a cultural dislocation it does not arise through an available narrative: its root may well lie in a misinterpretation of pioneer influences as they have emerged within the early childhood discourse. Again, however, it is necessary to recognise that for many practitioners their own implicit understandings of teaching and learning will not have inevitably confined them to a vision of practice that may grow out of influential contemporary writing. It is interesting to note that on one of the few occasions when OFSTED inspectors where highly critical of the educational value associated with provision observed it was a situation in which NNEB staff were

insufficiently supervised by qualified teachers in a nursery unit.

There remains one major area in which the discourse on early years practice is opaque. The notion of "play", for so many years an embedded feature of nursery provision, is so open to misunderstanding, so controversial from a theoretical and research perspective and so diverting in terms of public perceptions of quality learning, that it might usefully be replaced by a term that is at once more appropriate and is furthermore more readily accessible. Outside of the traditional culture of nursery education reference to childrens'' activities is widespread. It is not simply a term that is employed by a central government inspection agency. It is employed by teachers in the first years of schooling and is increasingly becoming the means through which teacher educators in some training institutions refer to practice. The continued use of "play" as a means of describing and in some cases defining the character of early childhood education is an outmoded relic of educators attempts to make sense of Froebel and of Dewey's "new education". For the future then, the emerging signs that nursery educators are taking seriously the issue of quality may only be regarded as a threat to aspects of the contemporary discourse. Taken to its conclusion, these developments are more likely to result in the achievement of the aspirations for children held by the acknowledged pioneers than the perpetuation of a discourse which has over time allowed itself to become severely influenced by particular values and selective interpretation of theory. If OFSTED has stimulated this journey of rediscovery then it will serve early childhood education well. The issue as to "what" is in the curriculum is always and inevitably a social statement. It remains important to reflect on the distinction

between ends and means and the role of the teacher in both determining and mediating the ends in view.

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